

Conspiracy of Kindness: Good News for the Poor

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In the Old Testament, the number seven was considered to be a kind of divine number. Every seventh day was to be sacred to God—a Sabbath Day. Every seventh year was to be a “Sabbath Year” —a sabbatical year—in which the land was to rest. It was an expression of God’s concern for his creation and of God’s concern for the poor.

Then, after seven times seven years came the really big deal—a particular year. In Leviticus, God says: *“Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan.*

Jubilee was the Hebrew word for a ram’s horn. The Jews were instructed to fashion a trumpet out of the horn of a wild ram, and this was to be so sacred that it was to be played only once every fifty years. Then there would be Jubilee. During Jubilee, three things would happen.

First, all debts were canceled. Anyone who had been living under bondage of debt would be freed. In the Jubilee Year, God says there will be a fresh start for those who are poor—for those who are likely to be sitting on the sideline:

If anyone is poor among your people in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your people and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. (Deut 15:7-10)

The second thing that happens in the Jubilee Year is all prisoners are released. In the Old Testament days, about the only thing they locked you up for was debt.

Third, in the Jubilee Year, all the land was supposed to go back to its original owner. Now in the ancient day, wealth was tied to land.

You might wonder, what was the rationale for all of this? God says: *The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. (Leviticus 25:23)*

Before the Israelites go into the Promised Land, God is laying out the plan, and he says something remarkable: *However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. (Deut 15:4-5)*

There is only one problem with the Jubilee Year. They never actually observed it. The best we can tell, it was never actually observed.

But when the Prophets would speak to the people, they would say: “You know, God hasn’t given up on this Jubilee idea yet. It’s a good idea. It’s God’s idea. We can’t pull it off ourselves, but it’s going to happen. It’s going to happen when Messiah comes. When Messiah comes, he will proclaim the Jubilee, and he will make it stick.”

the Prophet Isaiah wrote that the Messiah would say: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed to proclaim good news to the poor...to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor (Isa 61:1-2a)*

That’s Jubilee! When Messiah comes, then Jubilee is coming!

Finally, this rabbi named Jesus comes. He takes the scroll, turns to these words in Isaiah 61, and then he reads them to the people: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor ... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)*

Then he rolls up the scrolls. The Scripture says that all eyes are fixed on him. Then he sets them aside. He sits down, because that’s what rabbis did. He says: *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. (Luke 4:21)*

Jesus says that when you embrace the poor: *Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25: 40)*

Paul gives instructions to Christ’s followers in Corinth: *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income (1 Cor 16:2)*

Jesus say: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt 6:19-21)*

The Gospel of Jesus is not the Minimal Entrance Requirements for Getting Into Heaven After You Die. The Gospel is that through Jesus—no other way—through his life, through his teaching, through his death, through his resurrection, through his Spirit, the Kingdom of God is coming to this world.